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**Québec's Ethics and Religious Culture School Curriculum:
A New Discourse on Public Religion?
Dr. Donald L. Boisvert, St. John's College, Cambridge, UK, September 2012**

When I was a youngster in Québec, I went to an all-boys' Catholic school run by ~~a religious teaching order~~ ^{St.} the Irish Salesians of John Bosco. There was no question here about what sort of religious education you received. It was Catholic catechism, plain and simple, and of the pre-Vatican II variety! No talk of ethical or moral dilemmas, and even less so of other religious traditions. The Pope's on his throne, and all's right with the world. Catholic truth, as with the strap, was eternal.

Those of you familiar with the recent history of Québec will know that it is one of the places in the world where the impact of secularism has been the most dramatic. In many ways, it parallels the Irish experience. The Roman Catholic Church was the dominant cultural force in Québec for close to two hundred years, well until the so-called Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. The church controlled the province's major social institutions, most notably its network of social services such as hospitals and orphanages and, of course, education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. (Just to give you an indication of how very Catholic Québec was at some point: ~~despite not having the largest Catholic population in the world, Québec~~ ^{it} in the early decades of the 20th century, ^{it} was, in fact, the world's largest exporter, per capita, of Catholic missionaries.) And it was not until 2000 that the province's state-run educational system was "**de-confessionalized**" from

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Catholic and Protestant school boards to French and English linguistic ones. There are many interesting reasons for this Catholic dominance—all of which is beyond the immediate purview of this paper—but it should be pointed out that one of these has to do with the Church's uncanny ability down through the generations to frame the contours of the nationalist debate in Québec. This is ^{certainly} critical in terms of understanding Québec's religious history.

My topic is a potentially vast one, so let me set out for you what I propose to do ⁱⁿ for the balance of this presentation. I shall begin by providing a brief overview of the significant elements of Québec's primary and secondary school curriculum on Ethics and Religious Culture. As much detail could be given, this will only be a summary exercise. I will then offer a general sense of some of the public debates that the new curriculum has engendered. My central question is the following: can this innovative curricular program be seen as constituting a sort of new discourse on public religion? Given Québec's unique history, I argue, ^{tentatively}, that it can, and I will flesh this out in terms of four inter-related variables: values, plausibility, national identity, and the challenge of diversity. I shall conclude with questions.

In the fall of 2008, students entering Québec schools were presented with a new and unique way of studying religion: the mandatory program on Ethics and Religious Culture. The history surrounding the build-up to this program and its implementation is rather long and convoluted. Suffice it to say that it came in the

wake of the official de-confessionalization of Québec's educational system, where denominationally-based religious education was no longer possible. For several years prior to this, there had been a possibility, under the confessional system, for parents to opt for a sort of 'moral education' module for their children, coupled with either a Catholic or a Protestant orientation. The Québec government, in doing away with confessional school boards, needed to rethink and reframe the question of religious education. Ethics and Religious Culture was the flagship of the new approach.

The name itself tells you a great deal: ethics and religious culture. The first thing you notice is the coupling of ethics and religious culture, a rather unusual and puzzling combination for a program given at the lower educational levels. The second is the expression "religious culture"—not 'religious studies,' not 'the study of religion,' not even simply 'religion.' The third is the presence of ethics in its own right, perhaps more of a seemingly philosophical undertaking than a strictly religious one. What also strikes me—and this has not really been pointed out in the vast corpus of literature about this still relatively young educational program—is the academic tone of the nomenclature, which points to the determining role that Québec scholars of religion played in the elaboration of the program.

The Ethics and Religious Culture program is mandatory at both primary and secondary levels, though the orientation in each is different, with religious culture

being more present at the lower levels, and the ethics dimension more relevant and applicable at the higher ones. But the pedagogical and ideological orientations are unified in terms of the program as a whole. There are two fundamental aims: the first, to acknowledge the existence of the Other, ^{capital O} understood as she who is different ^{me or} from us; the second, the pursuit of the common good, understood as what is called in French *un vivre-ensemble*, or a belonging to, or a living in, a shared culture. I shall return to these two aims later, (as they are central to my overall argument about public religion.) Québec's education system is competency-based. The program therefore identifies three specific competencies: to ability to reflect on ethical questions; the capacity to understand the various elements of a religious culture; and the ability to develop the capacity for dialogue. This last is important, for it speaks to a core attitude which is indeed more practical than it is theoretical.

It is important to note that the program is not ahistorical, in that it includes a sort of hierarchy of religions, a kind of patrimonial emphasis. As is the case with some other countries (France and England most notably), a particular version of Christianity is viewed as having been more significant or meaningful in terms of the national history. The program therefore places greater emphasis on the study of ~~Roman Catholicism~~ ^{Christianity,} Judaism and aboriginal traditions, though it does ~~consider~~ ^{consider} the other major traditions, including secular ideologies and even atheism. This reaffirms a sort of "cultural Catholicism" already very much in vogue in Québec.

Mireille Estivalèzes, a scholar who has written extensively on the topic of religious education in both France and Québec, has outlined three basic types of objections to the Ethics and Religious Culture program since its inception, some of which have, in fact, already worked their way through the courts. The first is the conviction, expressed most notably by Catholic parents, that the mandatory nature of the program is a clear breach of the right of religious freedom guaranteed by the various human rights charters, both federal and provincial. A part of this argument has to do with the notion of the rights parents enjoy to determine or fix the type of religious education their child should receive. This first objection is often coupled with the second, which argues that the program introduces a sort of bad religious relativism, especially of the moral type, that can adversely affect children at a particularly impressionable age, once again undermining the will of parents. These two objections tend to be of the more conservative type, advocating, in essence, for a return to confessional religious education.

The third category of objections tends to be more aggressively secular, if not in fact downright anti-religious. This is the oft-heard argument that the Ethics and Religious Culture program is really an *apologia* in disguise for religion, and that it represents a back-door way of reintroducing confessional religious education into the schools. Part of the argument here can also include a reference to the dangers and pitfalls of multiculturalism in the context of a society that sees itself as guided

by a social compact based more on the ideal of inter-culturalism. Most often, adherents of this approach base their argumentation on the French notion of *laïcité*, a highly problematic and often misused term which has distinctly historical French roots, and which, as ^{my colleague} Solange Lefebvre so eloquently demonstrates, is not really applicable, for a variety of reasons, to the Québec context. In sum, this side of the debate tends to be guided by a rather rigid belief that Québec has liberated itself from the perverse influence of religion (^{meaning Roman} read Catholicism), and that now is not the time to be going back to such an oppressive time. You may think I'm drawing a bit of a caricature for you, but not really.

Both sets of arguments, however, point to a critically important observation when it comes to understanding the deeper significance of the Ethics and Religious Culture program, an element that scholars have emphasized repeatedly. It is a well-known fact that debates about education tend to be about a lot of things other than education itself, and a similar process seems to be happening here in the case of the Ethics and Religious Culture program, which has assumed the improbable shape of a cultural scapegoat. The long demise of Roman Catholicism in Québec, cultural anxieties around the principles and practice of reasonable accommodation, nationalist aspirations, understandings of secularism and of one's faith—all these questions, and undoubtedly several others, have become entangled with the vision and pedagogical boldness embodied by the Ethics and Religious Culture program.

And now to my core question: Is it possible to view Québec's Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum as an example of a new discourse on public religion?

I say "yes," but I need to qualify that statement with a few caveats.

First, it does not constitute a new type of public religion in and of itself, but rather a new way of talking about religion in a public sphere, specifically that of education. This may seem obvious, but the distinction bears repeating. Moreover, this public sphere is not just any ordinary one, but rather one of the pre-eminent institutions for the socialization of the young, and therefore a critically important place for gauging significant cultural shifts and apprehending emerging social values. Second, Québec is a highly secularized society which is still struggling with its omnipresent and not-so-distant religious past. How Québec chooses to educate its young with respect to religious phenomena says a great deal about how it is struggling to integrate its religious past into its historical narrative. Most importantly, it has chosen to do so in a consciously public way, through its schools. Third, ^{it is clear} ~~I want to suggest~~ that the Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum does propose a way, an attitude, an approach to "living out" and "living with" religion in a diversified secular society. The program clearly enunciates the perspectives it expects the citizens of Québec to adopt *vis-à-vis* the realities of religious life today.

I shall briefly flesh out these broad observations through a discussion of the variables of: values, plausibility, national identity, and the challenge of diversity.

Values: The values espoused by the Ethics and Religious Culture program are the classically liberal ones of open-mindedness, tolerance and respect, all very necessary and valuable in any modern secular society. Yet something much more fundamental is being constructed by this program, and I refer here to the two basic aims of the curriculum: acknowledging the Other as distinct from us, and the pursuit of the common good within a shared culture. We need to stop and realize, given the breadth and depth of Québec's religious past, just how radical a proposal this is, how its formulation, in a way, reframes and reorients Québec's religious identity. It does acknowledge the autonomy of—and the respect due to—the Other who is different from us (when you think about it historically, this is actually a non-Catholic Other), yet it maintains front-and-centre the long-standing ideal of a common culture. It delicately balances difference and autonomy with the notion of the common good. Given the checkered history of Québec education—and indeed of Québec nationalism—such a positioning constitutes a new public discourse.

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Plausibility: I refer here to the judicious way that the Ethics and Religious Culture program acknowledges the reality and specificity of Québec's religious past while simultaneously integrating it into a broader interpretive framework. Such historical coherence can indeed help provide public plausibility. This is done in two major ways: by prioritizing the Judeo-Christian and aboriginal inheritances, and also by including, in the law framing educational de-confessionalization, an

explicit commitment to the spiritual development of students, thereby making possible the hiring of spiritual life animators by the nominally non-confessional school boards. This is obviously a compromise, but an astute one in that it respects Québec's Catholic past, while simultaneously helping frame this past as a vital part of Québec's patrimonial inheritance. The public plausibility of the new curriculum is further enhanced by the cultural studies approach to religion that it explicitly endorses. I mentioned earlier the role of Québec scholars of religion in its design.

This should not be underestimated, as it reaffirms the program's overall integrity and legitimacy,

though it can also be seen as elitist for some.

National Identity: The history of Québec's educational system is very much tied up with the ebb and flow of Québec's nationalist identity and aspirations. If one recalls that, for a very long time, it was the Catholic Church that dominated and controlled schooling, then how religion was and is taught and studied might still be a sort of viable barometer of how the national or collective identity is constructed and mapped out. Quite clearly, this identity is no longer, neither implicitly nor explicitly, Catholic, though there still are cultural remnants of it. I would suggest that the national identity being proposed by the Ethics and Religious Culture program is of a different sort—Christian certainly, but only in an almost tangential way. More fundamentally, the program advocates for democracy itself as the new foundation of the will to be together, *vivre-ensemble*. By rejecting the

staunchly narrow *laïcité* of the French model, which is actually anti-clerical and anti-religious at heart, it proposes a sort of middle path between extremes—what has been called an “open” or a “positive” *laïcité*, one that still values religion, in its multiplicity, as a positive nationalist public force.

The Challenge of Diversity: I refer here to the three required competencies identified by the Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum: the ability to reflect on ethical questions, an understanding of the various components of a religion or of a religious culture, and the development of a capacity for dialogue. Together, they form a kind of tripartite roadmap for the living out of diversity in contemporary Québec—in other words, a sort of introductory course in citizenship. In a way, this harkens back to those old classes on “hygiène” and citizenship that some of us may remember from our past, but with a decidedly modern twist. Diversity—more specifically of the religious kind, but also understood in its broader multivalent dimensions—emerges here as the Québec government’s shining beacon, and most certainly as what it expects from future generations. It is expected that these three competencies will frame and condition public discourse in the province. In other words, the Ethics and Religious Culture program proposes so much more than a simple course on religious diversity; it advocates for a mode of public life. (Marvin?)

As my time is (almost) up, let me close with two questions which might open up our conversation. Taking our cue from Charles Taylor’s view that one of the

ways of understanding secularization is to see it as a “displacing” of religion from the totalizing centre of meaning to a mode of apprehension among many, might it be possible to see the Ethics and Religious Culture program as a form of that displacement? And is this a desirable thing, or does it further weaken the public face and viability of religion as a legitimate public voice? *I look forward to our exchange.*